

Social Media Use and Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

The rapid development of technology has brought us new ways of communicating. One form that has become popular in the last decade has been social networking sites (SNS). Technology and SNS use among young adults has increased dramatically during recent years. A majority of studies that look at how young adults use SNS have found that individuals' primary use of SNS has been to maintain relationships. Some studies have also found that young adults are spending more time on SNSs. If young adults may be spending more time on SNS, then we predict that face-to-face interactions in relationships decline. This research aims to examine the relationship between time spent on SNS and the quality of romantic intimate interactions. Results suggest that time spent on social networking sites does not affect intimacy in face-to-face relationships. This research can help counselors understand the effect that SNS may bring to intimate relationships.

Literature Review

What composes an intimate relationship and how is it different from a casual relationship? Researchers agree that intimacy in romantic relationships is made up of several components (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Intimate relationships are different from casual relationships in at least six areas: caring, commitment, interdependence, knowledge, mutuality, and trust (Marston et al., 1998). Intimate partners usually have confidential knowledge about each other. They share information that they would not normally reveal with most people they know. The sharing of this information increases the intimacy in their relationship and shows that they care. Partners also feel more affection toward each other than they do to most others. As intimate relationships develop they become intertwined (Berscheid et al., 2004). What one partner does affects their partner's behavior. Interdependence with each other has to take place over a period of time, occur frequently, and has to have a meaningful impact on each other's life. This interdependence then results in mutuality, a shift in which partners see themselves as a couple instead of individuals. Mutuality is apparent in the way a person talks about their partner when making future plans, for example a shift from saying "I" to "us" (Agnew et al., 1998). This usually occurs when new partners acknowledge their attachment to each

other. Another dimension of intimacy is trust, which was defined by Simpson (2007) as treating one fairly and honorably. People expect that their partners will be responsive to their needs and will not be harmed from their intimate relationship (Reis et al., 2004). Trust will solidify their intimate relationship. If trust is lost, people will become more distant and lose their closeness (Jones et al., 1997). Intimate partners are usually committed to their relationships. They invest time and effort to continue their romantic relationship. Without commitment people become less interdependent as time passes. However not all of these components are needed to have a functioning intimate relationship. For example, a person's relationship can be interdependent and connected in their daily lives but have no affection, openness, or trust. Such relationships are more intimate than acquaintances but less intimate than they used to.

In addition to the components of intimacy there are many factors that impact intimacy whether it is positive or negative. Some of those factors include self-disclosures, emotional support, and communication. Self-disclosure is the process of revealing information to someone else. According to Laurenceau et al. (2004), two people cannot be intimate without sharing personal information with each other. For intimate relationships to develop, partners need

to disclose information to each other. This information will gradually become more significant as the relationship develops. According to social penetration theory, people tend to disclose more important information as relationships develop (Altman & Taylor, 1973). When people just meet the range of topics they discuss and the personal significance stay at a superficial level. For example asking questions like “what is your major?” and “Where do you live?”. As the relationship develops the range of topics become broader and are more intimate. The disclosure of information helps communicate stability in the relationship, which in turn increases relationship satisfaction. The more self-disclosure there was between the partners the more satisfied they were (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). By disclosing information to their partners a person is becoming vulnerable. This increases intimacy because they believe their partners know and understand them. Another important factor that can influence relationships is emotional support.

Emotional support is one part of social support (Barry et al., 2009). People rely on their partner for emotional support, which can come in different forms like affection and reassurance. There are benefits and draw backs to emotional support. One of the benefits of emotional support is that it has positive physiological effects. According to Seeman et al. (2002), people who have affectionate partners tend to have lower blood pressure, cholesterol and stress level when compared to those who receive less support. People who receive emotional support also tend to experience less pain when they submerge their arms in ice-cold water (Brown et al., 2003). Although this suggests that emotional support has a positive effect on peoples well being, there can also be negative effects. A study conducted by Shrout et al. (2006), found that law students preparing for the bar exam found material support helpful, but emotional support made them more anxious. To provide effective emotional support one has to be attentive to personal preferences and the particular circumstances in which the support is needed.

Communication can also affect intimate relationships. Research has shown that constructive communication has a positive effect (Holman et al., 2001). Strategies like active listening and validation help couples communicate effectively (Markman et al., 1994). Active listening helps couples think and comprehend a message a partner is trying to convey. This helps couples avoid arguments and conflict from misunderstandings. Validation from one’s partner helps acknowledge one’s opinions and communicates respect for their points of view. These strategies can lead to greater relationship satisfaction. Communication between partners can also be negative. If couples engage in destructive communication then this can lead to decreased levels of relationship quality (Siffert & Schwarz, 2011). A meta-analysis conducted by Jackson (2010) found that conflict, criticism, and demand withdrawal were significant premarital predictors of later marital stress. Another important factor is time spent with your partner. A study conducted by Milek, Butler, and Bodenmann (2015) found that women who spent more time with their partner on a weekday with low intimacy might cause stress but in the long run it can help the relationship. Spending more time together allows for problem resolution and to maintain intimacy in the relationship.

Technology and Social Media Use

Mobile technology, such as cell phones, has become an important part of daily life in the United States. Data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Pew Research Center, 2015) shows how much cell phones have become part of an adult’s life. According to the Pew Research Center, 92% of American adults own a cell phone and 67% of those own a smartphone up from 35% in the spring of 2011. Ninety percent of cell phone owners say they frequently carry their phone with them and most either rarely or never turn off their phone (Pew Research Center, 2015). Not only has cell phone use gone up but there has also been an increase in smartphone owners. With the rise of

smartphones there has also been a rise in social networking sites (SNS).

SNS refer to any website that allows for social communication and the exchange of ideas (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). SNS can include sites like Facebook, photo/video-sharing sites like Instagram and YouTube, and blogging sites like Tumblr and email (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). SNS usage has also gone up in the past decade. In 2005, 7% of American adults used a social networking site compared to 65% of American adults using social networking sites today (Pew Research Center, 2015). Although there has been an increase in adults usage, young adults have always been more likely to use social media. Today 90% of young adults (18-29) use social media (Pew Research Center, 2015) compared to 77% adults (30-49) who use social media.

Research that looks at the effects of technology use in relationships has had inconsistent findings. A study conducted by Przybylski and Weinstein (2012) found that the mere presence of mobile phones could interfere with human interactions. The presence of the mobile device caused closeness, connection, and conversation quality to decrease. Another study found that holding a cell phone during a face to face interaction, participants rated the quality of the conversation less fulfilling compared to the absence of mobile device (Misra, Cheng, Genevie, & Yuan, 2016). A study conducted by McDaniel and Coyne (2016) found that interruptions, during couple interactions, due to technology use negatively affects personally well being and caused more conflict over technology use. They also found that phone use distracts from face to face interactions, which in turn diminished feelings of closeness among romantic partners. Fox and Moreland (2015) found that participants felt pressured to use Facebook to engage in relationship maintenance. Others have found that extensive use of the Internet, for communication purposes, was associated with lower levels of communication among the household and increases in depression and loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998).

A follow up study by Kraut et al. (2002) found that more frequent Internet use among adults was associated with more face-to-face communication with family and closer feelings toward friends. Bargh and McKenna (2004) found that rather than being a negative activity, computer-mediated communication not only helps maintain close relationships but also form new ones.

Research shows that young adults in romantic relationships are using SNS to connect with their partners in a positive way, which may increase relationship satisfaction (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015). They found that partners that share their relationship status were more likely to state they were satisfied with their relationship. Posting partner updates and posting pictures with their partner also led to a higher degree of relationship quality (Steers, Øverup, Brunson, & Acitelli, 2015). Although there is a positive side for people using SNSs to connect with others, there also is a down side. Fox and Moreland (2015) found that participants felt pressured to use Facebook to engage in relationship maintenance.

The purpose of this study is to determine if time spent on social media affects an individual's intimate relationship. If participants are using social media frequently during face-to-face interactions then they are taking time away from spending time with their partner. The less time you spend with your partner the more the relationship suffers and weakens. Conversely, participants who are low on social media use will report higher ratings of intimacy in their relationships. This research can help counselors understand the effect that SNS may bring to intimate relationships.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 410 participants that were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Ten participants did not complete the study so they were not included in the analysis. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be

at least 18 years old or older and lived in the United States. The participants in this study also had to be in a romantic relationship in order to participate in the study. The age range of the participants in the study was 18-73 years ($M = 34.71$, $SD = 11.47$). Most of the participants were female (59.5%) and male (40.5%). A large portion of the sample was Caucasian (74.5%), some Latino (8%), African American (8%), Asian/ Pacific Islander (5%), Native American (0.3%), and twelve people chose not to answer. Mturk participants received a monetary incentive for their participation.

Procedure

This study was conducted online, which allowed the participants to complete the study on their own time. The researcher posted the “Hit”, which is the link to the study, on Mturk with a brief description of the study. Participants who chose to participate in the Hit were redirected to Qualtrics to complete the online survey.

Once participants were directed to the survey, they were shown the informed consent page. After participants read the informed consent form, they were asked to indicate whether or not they were at least 18 years of age and agreed to consent to the study. Participants who clicked “yes” began the survey by answering a series of demographic questions; participants who clicked “no” were thanked for their time and excused from the study. The Mturk participants did not receive a monetary incentive if they were filtered out before they took the study. At the end of the study the participants received a random code, which they used to get the monetary incentive.

Participants were asked to answer questions regarding intimacy in their romantic relationship and their social media use. The Miller Social Intimacy Scale (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982) was used to assess intimacy and Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS; Olufadi, 2016) was used to assess social media use. After completing the study, participants were directed to the debriefing form and they were be thanked for their participation in the study.

Measures

Intimacy in romantic relationships was assessed using a modified version of the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS; Miller & Lefcourt, 1982). The scale includes the 17 original items that assess expressed intimacy and additional 17 items were created to reflect perceived reciprocity of intimacy (Reese-Weber, 2015). Twelve of the items assess frequency (“How often do you confide very personal information to him/her?”) rated from 1 = very rarely to 10 = almost always. Twenty-two items assess intensity (“How close do you feel to him/her most of the time?”) rated from 1 = not much to 10 = a great deal. All the items were then added to create an overall intimacy score that can range from 34 to 340 with higher score indicating higher levels of intimacy. In a previous study (Reese-Weber, 2015) the total intimacy score had an alpha coefficient of .93.

Social media use was assessed using a new scale called the Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS; Olufadi, 2016). This scale was developed to measure the time spent on social media. This scale is the first to try and capture the time people spend on social networking sites. The scale includes 29 items that assess five components of different times spent using SNS: relaxation and free periods, academic-related periods, public places related periods, stress related periods, and motives for use. The 29 items were rated on a scale from 1 = Not applicable to me during the past week to 11 = I used it more than 3 times during the past week but spent more than 30 min each time. The five components scores are added to produce an overall score that ranges from 5 to 23, five being low user of SNSs and 23 being extremely high users of SNSs.

Results

It was predicted that the participants who used social media the most would score lowest on the intimacy scale. Additionally, the participants who used social media the least would score the highest on the intimacy scale. A reliability analysis revealed that both measures

were reliable with Cronbach's Alphas of .94. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between social media usage and intimacy in the relationship. There was no correlation between the two variables, $r = 0.045$, $n = 410$, $p = 0.361$. The amount of time spent on social media was not correlated with intimacy in their relationships.

Discussion

This was an exploratory study conducted to find whether time spent on social networking sites had an effect on intimacy in relationships. The results of this study suggest that time spent on social media does not affect an individual's intimate relationship. A research study conducted by Johnson, Zabriskie, and Hill (2006) found that it wasn't the time spent together or the quality of the interaction but instead the satisfaction of leisure involvement that affected satisfaction in a relationship. In other words people might be spending more time on social media but they are satisfied with their

interactions thus report being happier in their relationship.

Limitations in this study include having only one person in the relationship take the study and having a mostly female Caucasian sample. Having a large female population limits our power to detect gender differences. More analyzes are needed to determine whether time in the relationship might have an impact on intimacy reported. Future research should focus on the quality and satisfaction of the interactions on social media instead of time. Interviewing both partners in a relationship is important to understand how they perceive social media and how it might be affecting their relationship.

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